

Turning the Tide of Violence in South Africa



As many as 60% of youth who graduate from school in South Africa cannot find jobs. (IDRC Photo: Peter Bennett)

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The root cause of violence in South Africa has not changed much since the apartheid era. According to the Johannesburg-based [Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation \(CSVR\)](#), South Africa's current high rate of violent crime is just as related to economic and social marginalization as it was during the 1980s. [See related sidebar: [Crime and Punishment in South Africa](#)]

What has changed is the context. During apartheid, any acts that helped render a township ungovernable — acts that would now be considered criminal — were perceived by the community to be a form of political protest. “Apartheid criminalized any form of politics, but the liberation struggle politicized crime,” says Graeme Simpson, CSVR's executive director.

In an effort to develop strategies to turn the tide of violence, CSVR has been analyzing the causes, extent, and the sustained pattern of violence in South Africa as it moved to democracy. The two-year project, initiated in 1999 and supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), aimed to develop a composite picture of how violence can be understood in “countries in transition.”

The 30-member research team examined the nature and extent of violence during South Africa's transition from apartheid rule to democracy. They focused on six areas: revenge violence and vigilantism, ex-combatants, foreigners (immigrants), hostels and hostel residents, state security forces, and taxi violence. The resulting series of reports, the [Violence and Transition Series](#), comprises a set of self-contained, but interrelated, documents that explore violence between 1980 and 2000.

Crime, truth, and reconciliation

Simpson points out that the history of South Africa's transition to multiparty democracy created a popular mythology: crime can be divided neatly into political and criminal activity. This was particularly true with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that defined political violence in relation to the fortunes of particular political parties or movements, he says. The TRC was set up by the Mandela-led government in the mid-1990s to investigate apartheid-era

atrocities and place blame on individuals. It granted amnesty to those who confessed their roles in full and could prove that their actions served some political motive. The aim was to heal the nation and prevent more cycles of racial and ethnic strife.

The TRC sanctioned a “privileged form of violence” says Simpson, in some cases providing immunity to individuals who, despite criminal intent, could link their actions, such as murder, to a political organization. Institutionalized and convicted criminals comprised the majority of applicants for hearings in front of the TRC.

National crisis

Approaches to solving violent crime have not taken into account these social complexities, Simpson suggests. “There is an assumption that, if you can forge a political agreement, democratize the government structure, and have a development program, you will overcome patterns of violence in that society.”

However, in a country that has one of the most unequal distributions of wealth in the world — gleaming shopping centres on one hand and town shops without adequate sanitation on the other — the anti-apartheid movement was as much about the fair and equitable access to economic resources as it was about political power.

In fact, even in the new multiracial South Africa, youth still face a lack of social and economic opportunities. South Africa’s labour minister recently called youth unemployment in the country “a national crisis,” reporting that as many as 60% of youth who graduate from school cannot find jobs.

Being poor in a wealthy environment breeds a desire for a better life — or a criminal one, in the case of a small minority of the population.

Status and opportunity

There are other factors that help make a life of crime very attractive to a small but significant group of marginalized youth. The career criminal in South Africa becomes immersed in a particular culture — an elaborate system of deviance with its own symbols and language. The young men who turn to crime as a way of life refer to their activities as “going on duty” or “keeping up the syllabus.” The very terms they use reflect the fact that crime is seen as a way to gain status and opportunity. In fact, from a certain perspective, youth involvement in gangs can actually be an expression of youth resilience — a social response to marginalization.

“In crime, there is a hierarchy,” says Tjovito, a young man interviewed by CSVr during research. “You grow from strength to strength until you are up there doing the business where there is a lot of money. When you are there, we respect you, and to us, you are like someone working on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.”

Future plans

“Understanding marginalization is very important in understanding the patterns of violence in South Africa,” says Simpson.

As a consequence, various strategies are currently being set in place within CSVr — for example, a refugee desk; projects on race, violence and reconciliation; ex-combatant therapeutic support groups; youth violence prevention in schools programs, and youth resilience projects. Research on

ex-combatants has been fundamental in developing a pilot project, particularly in relation to getting psychosocial support issues on to the demobilization strategy agenda. Related to this, Sasha Gear, author of the research report on ex-combatants, has given presentations to the demobilization committee and has received requests from the Military Veterans Advisory Board. Because the ex-combatant “issue” has only recently received attention, it is perhaps premature to predict the outcomes of these interventions, says Simpson.

Based on the vigilante research, CSVr has also submitted a proposal to the Gauteng Department of Safety and Liaison to conduct a localized, in-depth study of vigilante violence.

“In particular, this research has been fundamental in informing CSVr’s wider strategies for building sustainable peace and reconciliation, as much through our various pilot intervention projects at the community level, as through our policy and public education interventions,” says Simpson. “We have learned vital lessons about the continuities and changes in patterns of violence in embryonic democracies or societies emerging from intense civil conflict that have fundamentally shaped our unique approaches to violence prevention and peacebuilding.”

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For more information:

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Sidebar

Crime and Punishment in South Africa

Although the government downplays the statistics and denies that South Africa is the “crime capital of the world,” this post-apartheid country still has one of the highest murder rates. There were 22,000 people slain in 2000 — more than were killed in car accidents. Rape, robbery, hijacking, and burglary are also commonplace.

Recently the government banned publication of crime figures, because of “serious problems about the integrity and reliability of the statistics,” according to South African President Thabo Mbeki in his 2001 state-of-the-union address.

Support by government and the public for a more hard-line “law and order” approach to addressing crime can be linked to the perceived impact on South Africa’s economy and international reputation. Direct foreign investment in South Africa in 2000 was the lowest since 1994, and an estimated 25,000 professionals are now leaving South Africa annually, with 60% of emigration directly related to violent crime according to one study.

The South African Police Service is committed to recruiting 16,000 extra personnel over the next three years and is treading a fine line between providing police protection and undermining democracy and human rights. Amnesty International reported in 2002 that several hundred people had died in police custody or “as a result of police action” in South Africa.

There is also growing support for groups that take the law into their own hands. In 2000, South Africa's largest vigilante group, Mapogo a Matamaga, claimed to have a membership of more than 50,000 people.